

IMPROVISATION ON THE ORGAN

BY

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Schouten

Improvisation on the organ

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HENNIE SCHOUTEN

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Hennie Schouten, through his many publications, has already rendered invaluable services to the theory of music and to the teaching of the organ in particular. This short book on the art of improvising will serve as an excellent work of reference for the average organist who loves his work, who wishes to restrict his organ-playing mainly to religious services and who desires, therefore, to make a deeper study of the art of improvisation.

In doing so, the organist will learn to enhance and elaborate on the musical material inherently linked with the liturgy. The author, in his own words, wishes "to assist the prospective organist to master the technique of elementary improvisation."

There can be no doubt that Schouten's new publication will make an important contribution towards stimulating the appreciation and love of church organ-playing. That is my heartfelt wish.

Flor Peeters

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FOREWORD

During the last few decades, organists everywhere have shown a growing interest in the art of improvisation—an interest, which has been greatly stimulated in some countries by improvisation concerts given by such outstanding exponents of the art as Messieurs Dupré and Guilmant in France, and Lemare in England and America.

It goes without saying that exceptional ability is the first *sine qua non* in order to learn to express oneself in a personal manner in major musical forms like the sonata, fugue, variations, etc. It would not be exaggerating to say that only those organists who have grown up in this tradition can be referred to as improvisers. This, however, is not the last word about improvisation, for all church organists are confronted with improvisation problems Sunday after Sunday. The average church organist does not need to improvise fugues and passacaglias, rondos or scherzos, and no-one demands that their spontaneous creations must be characterized by original melodic invention or striking contrapuntal combinatory ability.

Every church organist, however, must be able to elaborate on a musical phrase taken from the liturgy in a simple, cohesive and responsible way. The purpose of this manual is to assist student organists to become proficient in the technique of elementary improvisation.

In order to be able to study the exercise material advantageously, theoretical knowledge is just as vital as a properly developed playing technique. The organist must, at least, have studied the theory of harmony, 2-, 3- and 4-part counterpoint and the principles governing musical analysis. It is also recommended that his studies include the canon, the invertible counterpoint and the fugue.

This should not be taken to imply that improvising can only be started when the theoretical studies have been completed. Anyone who knows the principles governing the theory of harmony and who has studied phrase construction, can start with a one-part improvisation. It goes without saying that the theoretical studies must also be continued at the same time.

Naturally, it is unnecessary for the exercise material to be studied in the order in which it is given in this book. A student, who has already studied counterpoint, does not need to wait to learn more about contrapuntal improvisation until he has fully completed the chapter on "Homophonic Improvisation."

Well-founded comments by colleagues, and the wishes of organists studying this book, will be given the greatest possible consideration in the event of it being reprinted.

I would like to express my grateful thanks to Henk Badings, the well-known Dutch composer, and to Albert de Klerk, Professor at the R.C. Church Music School in Utrecht, and E. J. Kooy, organist of the Church of St. John and St. Philip in The Hague, for their assistance in the preparation of the English edition.

H.S.

HARMONY

The fact was mentioned in the introduction that a study of the theory of harmony was indispensable to all who wished to learn to improvise. Not only must a large number of tasks be worked out on paper, but the organist must also build up a great routine in harmonizing basses and sopranos on the organ. In order to permit organists to ascertain whether their studies are sufficiently advanced from the harmonic point of view, a number of basses and sopranos are given below which should be developed for four voices on the organ. If these appear too difficult, a start should be made with simpler exercises. In this connection, I would draw attention to my book "Harmonieeleer aan de piano" ("Harmony for the Pianoforte," H. J. Paris, Amsterdam) which contains a large number of progressive exercises, all of which can be studied on the organ. The following basses and sopranos should then be attempted, striving each time towards appropriate musical solutions. When the bass progresses in minims, a flowing melody can frequently be superimposed by making use of suspensions, passing notes and auxiliary notes. The pedal need not be used during these exercises, as all parts can be played on one manual.

Basses

10 numbered musical staves for basses, each with a different key signature and time signature. The staves are numbered 1 through 10 on the left. Each staff begins with a bass clef and a time signature. The key signatures are: 1. C major (one sharp), 2. D major (two sharps), 3. E major (three sharps), 4. F major (one sharp), 5. G major (two sharps), 6. A major (three sharps), 7. B major (four sharps), 8. C major (no sharps or flats), 9. D major (two sharps), 10. E major (three sharps). The time signatures are: 1. C (common), 2. 2/4, 3. C (common), 4. 3/4, 5. 2/4, 6. C (common), 7. C (common), 8. 2/4, 9. 3/4, 10. 2/4. The music consists of single notes and rests, with some staves featuring beamed eighth notes.

Sopranos

1 

2 

3 

4 

5 

6 

7 

8 

9 

10 









HOMOPHONIC IMPROVISATION

One-part improvisation

Before a start can be made with one-part improvisation, a thorough study of phrase construction must be made. For this purpose, I would draw attention to Chapter I, "The construction of motifs, phrases and sentences from my book *"Muzikale Vormleer"*. ("An Analysis of Musical Form"—H. J. Paris, Amsterdam).

It is of the greatest importance that an organist, improvising in a given form, analyses accurately the works of great masters written in the same form. The importance of this form analysis cannot be stressed strongly enough. A study by the improvising organist of the structure of masterpieces dating from the various periods in the history of music can only prove extremely beneficial to him.

The examples given below, illustrating how a motif can be developed, may serve as an introduction to the following exercises. In the following bars from the Allegretto from Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op.31, No. 2, the first group of 4 notes is literally repeated twice, then repeated a number of times with a slight variation, yet maintaining the rhythm in such a way that the melodic physiognomy is preserved.

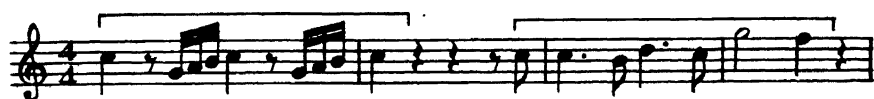


In this case, only the rhythm has remained the same, the melody having undergone a change.

It is possible, however, to vary not only the succession of the intervals but also the rhythm. In addition, the motif can also be expanded and developed. The following bars from the Minuet in Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op.22, provide a good example of varying the rhythm and expansion. A¹ is a variation on A, and A² the expansion.



The improviser can continue a selected motif by repeating, varying and developing it. On the other hand he can also introduce a new motif with a different rhythm immediately after the first motif, an example of which can be found in the first bars of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony.



These rather brief indications must suffice. For a more detailed treatment of the subject, the student should consult the appropriate text books on form analysis and composition.

The first exercise is the improvisation of a concluding phrase of four bars based on a given introductory phrase. The first bars of the introductory phrase are repeated in the concluding phrase. As the concluding phrase finishes on the tonic, however, it must have a different ending from the introductory phrase.

Taking the following introductory phrase



the following concluding phrase might be improvised:



The last bars of the concluding phrase, however, can equally be either



Various endings are, therefore, possible.

Improvise concluding phrases based on the following introductory phrases :





Concluding phrases must now be improvised which, although dissimilar to a large extent to the introductory phrases, correspond with them from a rhythmic and melodic point of view.

In the following example, the concluding phrase (with a slight variation in the last but one bar) has the same rhythm as the introductory phrase. In addition, there is an obvious similarity in the succession of the intervals. In bars 1 and 5 there is the same progression of ascending and descending intervals, and this is also the case with bars 2 and 6.



In the concluding phrase which follows, a certain similarity is also apparent, as the first bar of the introductory phrase occurs in reverse in the concluding phrase.



The following example shows an ascending movement in the introductory phrase being answered by a descending one in the concluding phrase.



Improvise a number of concluding phrases to match each of the following introductory phrases. The exercises so far given may also be used for this purpose.



The following exercise consists of improvising a concluding phrase, built up partially on the same motifs as the introductory phrase, or also on entirely new motifs. The following introductory phrase is built up of 2 motifs.



In the first of the concluding phrases given below, one can find the same motifs, but in a different order. The second concluding phrase begins with a new motif, followed by a repetition of motif 1 from the introductory phrase. The third concluding phrase is built up of entirely new motif material.



Improvise a number of concluding phrases to match each of the following introductory phrases. The previous exercises may also be used for this purpose.



A start can now be made on the improvisation of complete phrases. In order to provide a certain amount of guidance, I have included the following rhythmic patterns of passages built up on one motif. Adhering to these patterns, melodies of 8 bars should be improvised. As a rule, an imperfect cadence on the dominant will have to be made in the fourth bar, though other cadences are, of course, possible.



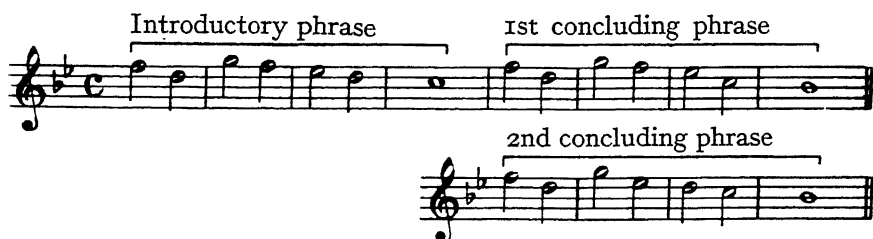
Before starting to improvise completely free phrases based on a single motif, it may prove desirable to write down a number of motifs in various keys and in various times. One or more phrases can then be improvised on each of these motifs.

When sufficient routine has been gained in this respect, a start can be made on the improvisation of phrases based on more than one motif. Every teacher knows that when it comes to improvising, some students possess a natural ability to do what others only acquire after years of practice. It frequently happens too, that students experience difficulty in combining a number of motifs to form a musical entity, falling back time and again on the same rhythmic devices. In that case, it may prove useful to give the student only the rhythmic notation from various compositions, and to allow him to improvise while adhering to these rhythms.

The exercises given will serve admirably to assist the student in becoming proficient in the technique of phrase construction. Gradually, however, an attempt must be made to improvise phrases of precisely 8 bars, without counting the bars while playing, and without being consciously aware of the make-up or succession of the motifs. In the end, the student must allow himself to be led by his sense of form, he must be able to hear whether a phrase is balanced, and whether it is satisfying from a musical point of view. When a student has progressed to the extent where he can allow his fancy to dictate his improvisations, then, in certain cases, he is bound to expand a phrase. I have purposely omitted giving any exercises: when a deliberate effort is made to improvise an irregular phrase, the result will seldom be satisfactory from a musical point of view.

The improvisation of more than one part

As with one-part improvisation, a start should also be made in this case with the improvisation of a concluding phrase which, with the exception of the final notes, is identical with the introductory phrase. In certain cases, it may be deemed desirable for the second bar of the concluding phrase to differ from its counterpart in the introductory phrase. In the following example, the second concluding phrase runs much more naturally than the first.



When a satisfactory concluding phrase has been found, the whole of the passage can be harmonized for four voices, whereby the bass is played on the pedal. The student should not only strive to ensure that the harmony is appropriate, but must also concentrate on good fingering and footing and a technically correct performance.

The aforementioned phrase could, therefore, be harmonized as follows :



Improvise a suitable concluding phrase to the following introductory phrases. Then play the introductory and concluding phrase slowly and try and listen to the latent harmony. Finally, harmonize the whole phrase. The tempo should be slow enough to allow the whole to be followed completely. Every exercise must be repeated as often as necessary until it can be played smoothly and correctly.

Major





Minor



Concluding phrases must now be worked out for the above introductory phrases which, although rhythmically identical with the introductory phrase, differ from it melodically.

Improvise various concluding phrases, to suit each introductory phrase, made up of minims. Adhere to the most satisfactory concluding phrase and harmonize the latter as already indicated.

When the above exercises no longer present any difficulty, the student may attempt more difficult phrases. It is recommended that various concluding phrases are improvised for each of the following introductory phrases, all of which should be harmonized. These phrases allow of a richer harmony : chords of the seventh, intermediary dominants and grace notes may be employed. The phrases, given under "One-part improvisation," can also be developed for four voices.

Major





Minor




The improvisation of complete phrases of 8 bars needs no further elucidation. In this case too, a phrase can be built up on one or more motifs. It is also recommended that exercises are carried out in various keys and in various times.

Improvisation of a modulating concluding phrase

When improvising a modulating concluding phrase, a natural, logical modulation must be achieved in 4 bars.

Here are several examples :

Intro. phrase in C maj. Concl. phrase modulates to G maj.

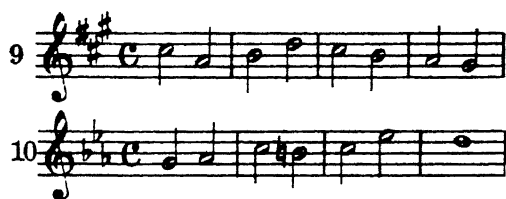


Intro. phrase in C maj. Concl. phrase modulates to E min.



Improvise modulating concluding phrases to suit the following introductory phrases :

- 1  Concluding phrases modulating to A min., G maj., E min., F maj., and D min.
- 2  Concluding phrases modulating to E min., D maj., B min., F maj., B Flat maj.
- 3  Concluding phrases modulating to C min., E flat maj., A flat maj., F min., F maj.
- 4  Concluding phrases modulating to Bmin., F sharp min., C sharp min., E maj., C maj.
- 5  Concluding phrases modulating to E flat min., D maj., C maj., D min., G min.
- 6  Concluding phrases modulating to C maj., C sharp min., G sharp min., B maj., F maj.
- 7  Concluding phrases modulating to A maj., D maj., D min., C maj.
- 8  Concluding phrases modulating to D maj., C sharp min., F sharp min., C maj.



Concluding phrases modulating to D maj., B min., E maj., C sharp min.

Concluding phrases modulating to E flat maj., G min., B flat maj., F min., A flat maj.

In the following examples only the first bars are given. These bars must be developed into a phrase of 8 bars; it is possible to use either the given motifs only and or other motifs. One can modulate directly to the new key, or reach the new key by way of one or more intermediate keys. In the latter case, the bars in which a certain degree of the intermediate key must fall must be determined beforehand.

The intermediate keys, through which the new key can be reached, are indicated in the first exercise given below.



Completely free phrases may now be improvised, modulating from A flat major to G major (2/4 time), D major to G sharp minor (3/4 time,) B flat major to E minor (4/4 time) and C sharp minor to C major (6/8), A major to F major (9/8), E major to A flat major (4/4). It is recommended that these exercises are developed in various ways, chromatically, as well as in both their enharmonic and diatonic forms.

Binary form

The simple binary form consists of two phrases of 8 bars each. During the first phrase, one often modulates to a related key, modulating back to the original main key in the second phrase.

A detailed analysis of the various forms will be found in the appropriate chapter of my "Muzikale Vormleer" ("An Analysis of Musical Form").

In order to provide a guide for the student's first exercises, a number of "patterns" are given below. The indication "Motif 1," by a group of 2 or 4 bars, does not mean that this motif must be 2 or 4 bars long, but that the group in question must be built up on this motif.

A. Phrase 1: 8 bars, modulating from C major to G major

Bars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Motif 1				Motif 2			

Phrase 2: 8 bars, modulating from G major to C major

Bars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Motif 1				Motif 2			

B. Phrase 1: modulating from G minor to B flat major

Bars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Motif 1		Motif 2		Motif 1		Motif 2	

Phrase 2: modulating from B flat major to G minor

Bars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Motif 1		Motif 3		Motif 1		Motif 2	

C. Phrase 1: modulating from B minor to D major

Bars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Motif 1		Motif 2		Motif 1		Motif 2	

Phrase 2: modulating from D major to B minor

Bars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Motif 1				Motif 3		Motif 4	

These patterns are by no means the end of all the possibilities of improvising on binary forms. Here, too, the organist must discover all the various possibilities for himself in the long run.

Ternary form

A simple ternary form consists of three phrases, the third generally being a repetition of the first, when the pattern is A-B-A. Improvising in this form makes a heavy demand on the memory, as the first phrase must be remembered while playing the second, in order that it may be repeated again afterwards. Instead of literal repetition, however, a new development of the same motifs is permissible, while adhering to the same harmony.

Improvise in ternary form, in a major key of your own choice, the second part of which should be in the dominant key. Then attempt a similar one in a minor key, the second part of which should be in the parallel key.

Improvising Homophonic chorale preludes

Homophonic chorale preludes are preferably based on one or more motifs taken from the first or different lines of a chorale.

In the bars which follow, all the notes of the first line of Psalm 86 of the French Psalter can be found. This motif also lends itself to being used inverted.



When we wish to improvise a prelude of 8 bars on a given motif, we can set about it in a variety of different ways. We can repeat the motif on another degree of the scale or in a different key, we can vary it, invert it or follow it with a new motif. In order to provide a guide for the student's first exercise, a number of patterns for the development of a given motif, are given below.

A. Motif in major key, motif modulating to B flat major.

(bars 1 and 2) (bars 3 and 4)

Motif inverted, , motif in major key

(bars 5 and 6) (bars 7 and 8)

B. Motif in major key, motif modulating to D minor

(bars 1 and 2) (bars 3 and 4)

Modulating back with variations on the motif to the major key.

(bars 5 to 8)

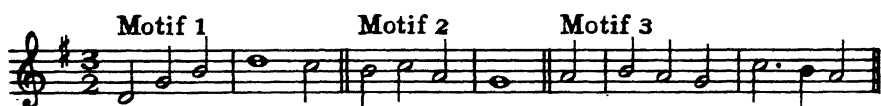
There are countless ways of improvising a prelude on a given motif in one of these forms: this provides the organist with opportunity to apply everything dealt with in the chapter on Homophonic Improvisation. A motif should be taken first of all from one of the chorale lines. Until a fair degree of proficiency has been attained, the student should write the motif down and consider the possibilities which it offers. In certain cases it is recommended that the different variations which the motif offers should also be noted down. A rough plan should then be drawn up.

Even in this simple form, a great deal of variation is possible. Student organists, who are unable to make a deep study of counterpoint, can improvise preludes which are logically constructed and musically appropriate in a simple, homophonic form.

Improvise a number of preludes, approximately 8 bars long for use with chorales of your own choice.

A prelude, approximately 16 bars long can also be built up from a single line of a chorale. In order to avoid the danger of monotony, it will generally prove desirable to vary the motifs in an expressive manner and to play them in various keys. It is probably superfluous to say that indiscriminate modulation should be avoided. During the preliminary exercises it is necessary in any case to restrict oneself to related keys.

The following motifs may be derived from the hymn "Richmond," by Thomas Haweis.



Improvise a prelude of 16 bars on this hymn, based on the following pattern :

Bars 1-8, modulating from G to D ;

(Bars 1-6, on motif 1, bars 7-8 on motif 2) ;

Bars 9-12, modulating back to G major, on motif 3 ;

Bars 13-16, in G major on motifs 1 and 2.

For a prelude on "An Wasserflüssen Babylon," we will use the first and fifth line of the chorale as a basis.



Bar 1-8 and bars 13-16 could be built on A, bar 9-12 on B. It is also possible to alternate A and B already in the first phrase. It is now no longer necessary to give instructions for the development of the motifs. I would only like to draw attention to the alternation which can be obtained by harmonizing a melodic fragment in various ways.



A prelude in ternary form might be built up as follows :
 Prelude to the hymn " Diademata."



Bars 1-8, on the first line, modulating to B major.

Bars 9-16, on the second line, beginning in B major and modulating back to E major through related keys.

Bars 17-24, on the first line in the original key.

Organists who have studied counterpoint, will be struck immediately by the possibilities which both motifs offer for imitation. It is quite permissible to make use of imitations when improvising in a homophonic form.

Motif material for the ternary form can also be derived from a Gregorian melody.



The above excerpts taken from the Introitus " In Die Nativitatis Domini " might be improvised as follows :



Using these motifs, improvise in ternary form A-B-A.

Note.—it is more in keeping with the free rhythm of the Gregorian chants to time A and B in 2/4 and 3/4 time respectively.



Naturally, an improvisation making use of alternating time signatures, makes heavy demands on the organist's powers of concentration. Students, who find this exercise still a little difficult at this stage, had better wait until they have become more proficient in the art of improvising by means of other exercises.

Obviously, I have only been able to give certain indications in this chapter, for a deep treatment of homophonic chorale improvisation would be out of the question in such a short space. Experience has shown, however, that a few indications are generally sufficient (for organists capable of improvising musical and logically constructed forms) to assist them in the improvisation of homophonic chorale preludes.

POLYPHONIC IMPROVISATION

It not infrequently happens that a student who is able to solve all kinds of contrapuntal problems on paper experiences the greatest difficulty when it comes to elementary contrapuntal improvisation. The cause of this, often enough, is that his polyphonic ear has not been developed adequately. In order to improvise two parts, one must, of necessity, be able to follow two parts simultaneously.

There are various methods of developing one's polyphonic ear. The performance of polyphonic music is an excellent way of doing so, one part being sung and the other played simultaneously. The best way to begin is to start with simple two-part pieces (e.g. canons), in which both parts are sung alternatively. Later, three- and four-part compositions will be dealt with. In this case, one must concentrate specially on singing the middle part(s), while playing the other parts simultaneously. Adequate exercise material can be found in the works of Josquin, Palestrina and other old masters, written in the vocal style.

Another method is the system of writing down polyphonic dictations. Naturally, one must begin with two-part dictations, and the transition to three-part works must be achieved gradually.

The playing of canons, in which only the *proposta* (subject) is given, is also very useful. This forces the organist to follow two voices simultaneously. In this case, however, the *proposta* must be learnt by heart separately. If it is played from the music, it is bound to be combined automatically by the eye instead of by the ear.

Long canons, and canons of which the *proposta* is not readily discernible by the ear, should therefore not be used. Fugue themes, however, which permit canonic *stretto*, are very suitable. By way of introduction, a number of short and very simple canonic exercises precede the following fugue themes and canonic fragments from Bach's Dorian Fugue.

The place where the *riposta* should enter is indicated in these exercises. The following exercise should be performed as follows:

At the octave

Both parts should be played on different manuals with contrasting tone-colour. Canons notated in the bass, can be played on one manual and the pedal.

In the following exercises the *proposita*, therefore, should be memorized as well as the place where the *riposta* enters, after which the canon can be played from memory.

1		At the octave
2		At the octave
3		At the octave
4		At the octave
5		At the octave
6		At the octave
7		At the octave

Canons from the Dorian Fugue for organ by J. S. Bach.

1		At the octave
2		At the unison
3		At the octave

4

At the octave

5

At the fifth

6

At the fifth

7

At the fourth

8

At the sixth

9

At the seventh


10

At the ninth

11

At the fourth

Fugue themes from Bach's "Wohltemperiertes Clavier" I.



Canon at the fifth



At the seventh



At the fifth



At the fourth.



At the third



At the sixth



At the octave



At the octave



At the octave



At the octave

Kyrie eleison from the "Hohe Messe"

J. S. Bach



Gratias from the same work



Confiteor from the same work



Confiteor



Organ fugue in G major

J. S. Bach



Mattheson



Battiferri



Meyerbeer



E. Gigout



G. F. Handel



Anonymous



Improvising on a given Cantus Firmus

Two-part counterpoint

The first exercise consists of improvising a counterpoint in semibreves against a given cantus firmus. When doing so, the following rules must be borne in mind :

- 1 The permissible melodic intervals are : major and minor second, major and minor third, perfect fourth, perfect fifth, minor sixth and perfect octave.
- 2 No two intervals of a fourth or a fifth may follow each other in succession.
- 3 A skip of an octave is not permissible in the leading note.
- 4 A note may only be repeated whenever this is necessitated by the voice leading.
- 5 Only consonant intervals may be used between the cantus firmus and the counterpoint.
- 6 The unison is only permitted in the first and last bar.
- 7 Every exercise must begin and end with a perfect consonance. Whenever the cantus firmus lies in the lower part, the counterpoint begins on the unison, dominant or octave ; when the cantus firmus is in the upper voice, the counterpoint begins on the unison or octave.
- 8 No more than three thirds or three sixths should follow each other in succession.
- 9 The distance between the cantus firmus and the counterpoint should not as a rule exceed a tenth.
- 10 A succession of parallel or hidden fifths and octaves is forbidden.
- 11 The voices may interlace each other.
- 12 Modulation to the relative key, the dominant key and its parallel, the sub-dominant key and its parallel, is permissible.
- 13 The cantus firmus may (e.g. in connection with the range of the pedal) be transposed an octave higher or lower, or into another key.

The following cantus firmus should be developed in the following ways :

- 1 C.F. right-hand, counterpoint left-hand.
- 2 C.F. left-hand, counterpoint right-hand.
- 3 C.F. left-hand, counterpoint pedal.
- 4 C.F. pedal, counterpoint left-hand.

The cantus firmus and counterpoint should be played on various manuals with 8' feet registers of equal volume, but differing in tone-colour. In the case of the pedal, only 8' feet registers should be used.

For organists who have already practised the written development of cantus firmi, improvising a counterpoint in semibreves should not present any great difficulty. It is not sufficient, however, to be satisfied

with strictly adhering to the rules given above. In spite of the restricted possibilities an attempt must be made to achieve a complete musical entity.

Counter-point

C.F.

The counterpoint above creates an uncertain, dull impression. Nor does it progress deliberately towards a melodic climax. In addition, a monotonous effect is created by the fact that "A" is repeated three times in four successive notes.

The following counterpoint, set against the same C.F., flows much more naturally—

Counter-point

C.F.

While the highest note of the melody is reached on the fifth note in the C.F., it is not reached until the seventh note in the counterpoint. This gives the counterpoint, therefore, an independent melodic line. Without it differing from the cantus firmus from a rhythmic point of view, the counterpoint assumes a curve of its own due to the crossing of the higher notes.

If the study of the following cantus firmi is to serve its proper purpose, an attempt must be made to find musical counterpoints which flow naturally. In addition, the exercises must be repeated as often as may be necessary until the student can play them without hesitation in good time and with the correct fingering and footing.

The following cantus firmi should be dealt with in this way—

1

2

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14

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16

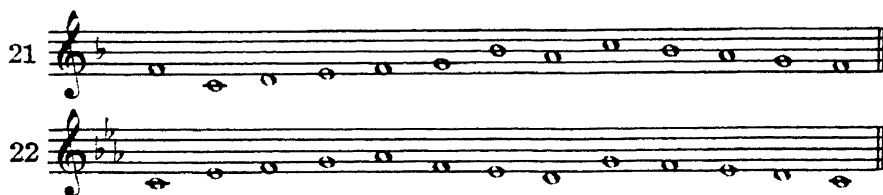
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18

19

20

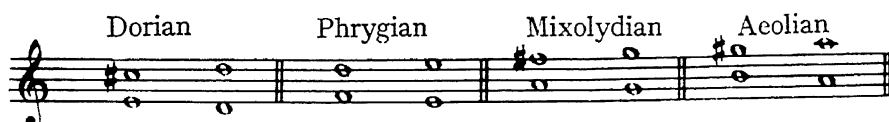
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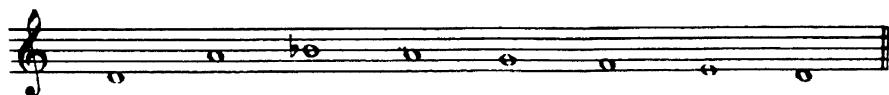
Cantus firmi in ecclesiastical modes

One often hears the opinion voiced that in music written in one of the ecclesiastical modes, no notes should occur which are foreign to the scale. It is true that in certain cases there is a special attraction in only using notes common to the scale. All the same, the prohibition of notes foreign to the scale cannot be defended on historic grounds.

During the period in which the ecclesiastical modes flourished, the seventh note was augmented at the end in the Dorian, Mixolydian and Aeolian modes, but not in the Phrygian.



In the Dorian mode, the sixth was not flattened in ascending passages, but frequently when descending, and invariably when this sixth formed an auxiliary note with the dominant.



It is impossible to treat the ecclesiastical modes at greater length within the short space of this book. Organists who wish to learn more about this subject are advised to study the book on counterpoint theory by Knud Jeppesen.

The following cantus firmi must be exercised in the same way as indicated in the previous pages. The same rules apply. The only restriction is that as yet there should be no modulation. Notes foreign to the scale may only be used in a Dorian, Mixolydian or Aeolian exercise in the last but one bar, when the seventh note should be raised a semitone. In addition, the sixth is lowered a semitone whenever this serves as an alternating note to the fifth.

The cantus firmi to be dealt with in this way are as follows :





When improvising a counterpoint in crotchets against a cantus firmus in semibreves, the following should be borne in mind :

- 1 The first crotchet of the bar must be a concord ; the following notes can be either consonants or dissonants (passing or auxiliary notes).
 - 2 The unison is permitted, except on the first beat of the bar ; in that case the counterpoint must continue in the opposite direction.
 - 3 The first bar can begin with a crotchet, but it must be followed by a perfect consonant.
 - 4 The last bar can include four crotchets, two minims or a semi-breve.
 - 5 Two or more skips should not be made in the same direction.
 - 6 No skip upwards should be made from an accented to an unaccented part of the bar.
 - 7 The " nota cambiata " can be used frequently.
- A number of examples are given below.



II

I C.F.

Dorian

The cantus firmi already given can also be used for these exercises. Mixed counterpoint (florid counterpoint) can include minims, crotchets and syncopated notes, in addition to quavers and a dotted minim. The syncopated note must be introduced by a minim and must be resolved in the second half of the bar. The syncopated note can also be resolved directly, but it is also possible for the note on which it resolves to be preceded by one or more other notes.

When crotchets occur in the first half of the bar, a minim may occupy the second half, unless this minim is tied-over to the following bar. Quavers can only be used on the second and fourth beat of the bar; preferably not more than two quavers should be used per bar. In mixed counterpoint, in $3/2$ time, the following groups may be encountered—the semibreve, the minim, the dotted minim, the crotchet and the syncopated note, but no quavers. Rhythms frequently encountered in $3/2$ time are :

The following rhythms are not usually met with :

or

A number of examples of counterpoints in $4/4$ and $3/2$ time are given below. The cantus firmi, given on pages 29 to 33 can also be again developed in four different ways here.

II

I C.F.

Three-part counterpoint

Apparently, there is no great difference between improvising two parts in semibreves against a given cantus firmus in the soprano, and the three-part harmonization of a cantus firmus. When improvising in counterpoint, however, an attempt must be made to achieve the greatest possible degree of independence of the melodies. Each part must be characterized by its own melodic curve, so that each note should not be repeated more than once. The simultaneous repetition of two notes in two different parts is, therefore, not permitted.

When attempting to achieve a good melodic line, it may not always be possible to complete all chords fully. The last chord but one, however, must always be complete.

The fourth (the augmented as well) is always permissible between the upper and middle voices, but never between the lower voice or any of the others.

Hidden fifths and octaves can be played without objection, providing the smallest interval occurs in the upper voice. The interval between the upper and lower voices should preferably not exceed two octaves.

The cantus firmi (major, minor and in the ecclesiastical modes) already given can now be developed in three ways :

- I Cantus firmus, upper voice, manual 2.
- Counterpoint 1, middle voice, manual 1.
- Counterpoint 2, lower voice, pedal.

- 2 Counterpoint 1, upper voice, manual 2.
Cantus firmus, middle voice, manual 1.
Counterpoint 2, lower voice, pedal.
- 3 Counterpoint 1, upper voice, manual 2;
Counterpoint 2, middle voice, manual 1.
Cantus firmus, lower voice, pedal.

The rules governing two-part counterpoint still apply when improvising a counterpoint in semibreves and one in minims against a given cantus firmus.

Each cantus firmus must be developed in six different ways :

- 1 Cantus firmus, upper voice, manual 2.
Counterpoint in minims, middle voice, manual 1.
Counterpoint in semibreves, lower voice, pedal.
- 2 C.F., upper voice, manual 2.
C.p., in semibreves, middle voice, manual 1.
C.p., in minims, lower voice, pedal.
- 3 C.p., in minims, upper voice, manual 2.
C.F., middle voice, manual 1.
C.p., in semibreves, lower voice, pedal.
- 4 C.p., in semibreves, upper voice, manual 2.
C.F., middle voice, manual 1.
C.p., in minims, lower voice, pedal.
- 5 C.p., in minims, upper voice, manual 2.
C.p., in semibreves, middle voice, manual 1.
C.F., lower voice, pedal.
- 6 C.p., in semibreves, upper voice, manual 2.
C.p., in minims, middle voice, manual 1.
C.F., lower voice, pedal.

It is not necessary that the order given above is strictly adhered to. As the exercises in which the counterpoint in minims is in the lower voice are the most difficult, these can better be left until the last.

C.F.
II

I

Ped.

The rules governing two-part mixed counterpoint still apply when improvising a counterpoint in mixed note values and one in semibreves against a given cantus firmus. In this case, too, the exercises in which the mixed counterpoint occurs in the lower voice can better be kept until the last.

Several cantus firmi, in major, minor and the ecclesiastical modes, should be treated in this way, both in 4/4 and 3/2 time, until adequate experience has been gained.

Dorian

II
C.F.

I

Ped.

Imitation

Two of the various possibilities which imitation offers are of immediate interest to us :

- 1 A motif is imitated in one voice.
- 2 A motif, occurring in one voice, is imitated in the others.

The following examples, taken from Bach's works, illustrate both possibilities :

In the above example (bars 17-19 of Bach's Organ Prelude in F minor), which is given on four staves for the sake of clarity, a different motif is imitated in each of the four voices.

In the following bars from Bach's Organ Fugue in C minor, the motif, introduced in the upper voice, is imitated first in the middle voice and later in the lower voice :



We shall start with the improvisation of a short two-part fragment, in which a separate motif is imitated in each of the voices :



If we were to continue these bars as follows, the result would be a very monotonous sequence :



Imitating the first motif a second above has too little effect ; also, having heard the third bar, one has very little difficulty in forecasting the further course of the progression. There is nothing more tiring and boring than a sequence which contains nothing new.

When improvising short fragments in which this imitation technique is employed, one must first decide the interval at which the motif is to be imitated. There are no rules governing this, and the organist must allow this to be dictated by his own taste and fantasy.

He must also bear in mind that a sequence should not be too long—it becomes so when its repetition creates a monotonous effect.

The following example shows how the bars given above might be developed :



Special attention must be paid to imitating the same motif in both voices. It is unnecessary to repeat the motif without any alteration—a skip of a fifth can, for example, be answered by jumping a fourth or an octave. The motif may also be played wholly, or partially inverted. All one must bear in mind is that it remains recognizable.



can be imitated as follows—



When a motif is being imitated in two voices, the imitation can be interrupted for one or two bars. A motif may be introduced in the upper voice and answered in the lower voice, before reversing the procedure after a short break by introducing the subject matter in the lower voice and answering it in the upper voice. The only criterion is that an effective musical result is achieved.

It is strongly recommended that these exercises be carried out on two manuals with contrasting timbres. This makes it easier to follow the course of both voices.

Here is an example :



Improvise two-part fragments, each 6-10 bars long, making use of the following motifs—



In addition, the organist must improvise a large number of fragments on themes of his own invention. This entails a great deal of exercise, as imitation is of the greatest significance in matters of improvisation.

Now let us consider improvising two counterpoints against a cantus firmus which imitate each other. In this case too, it is not necessary to continue the imitation without an interruption. Study the following examples :

II

I

Ped
C.F.

Mixolydian

II

I
C.F.

Ped

The cantus firmus should be played alternately in the upper, middle and lower voices. It is recommended that the student commences with the cantus firmus in the lower voice.

The cantus firmi given on pages 29-32 may also be used as exercise material.

Four-part counterpoint

Three counterpoints in semibreves can be improvised against a single cantus firmus in the following ways :

- 1 Soprano and alto, right-hand, manual 2.
Tenor, Cantus firmus, left-hand, manual 1.
Bass, pedal.
- 2 Soprano, Cantus firmus, right-hand, manual 2.
Alto and tenor, left-hand, manual 1.
Bass, pedal.
- 3 Soprano and alto, right-hand, manual 2.
Tenor, left-hand, manual 1.
Bass, Cantus firmus, pedal.

Here is an example with the Cantus firmus in the tenor :

The musical score is written for four staves, labeled on the left as II, II, I C.F., and Ped. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The notation is as follows:

- Staff II (Soprano):** Treble clef. Notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4.
- Staff II (Alto):** Treble clef. Notes: E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3, D3, C3.
- Staff I C.F. (Tenor):** Bass clef. Notes: C3, D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4.
- Staff Ped. (Bass):** Bass clef. Notes: C3, D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4.

The Cantus firmus (C.F.) is a single melodic line in the tenor part, consisting of ten semibreve notes. The other three parts (Soprano, Alto, and Bass) provide counterpoint to it.

Naturally, it is quite possible to improvise three voices in counterpoint making use of imitation. No exercises are given for this, as this manual is restricted purely to elementary improvisation.

All those who have diligently studied the exercise material given up to this point, will be sufficiently advanced to commence chorale improvisation.

IMPROVISING POLYPHONIC CHORALE PRELUDES

The two-part chorale prelude

The simplest form of a two-part chorale prelude is a chorale melody accompanied by a counterpoint in shorter (though equal) notes.

In the example which follows, the first line of the hymn, "The Old rooth," is set in counterpoint against a counterpoint in crotchets—

The remaining lines of the hymn should be developed in the same way on the organ.

Now, let us write out the hymn in semibreves, improvising a counterpoint in crotchets—

Treat the "Chant Magnificat," by J. Barnby, in the same way.



In order to provide a certain amount of variety, the first lines of a hymn may be played in the upper voice, the following in the lower voice, or in the reverse order. Develop Henry Smart's "Chant Magnificat" in the same way.

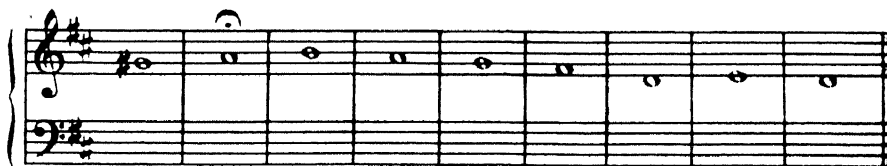
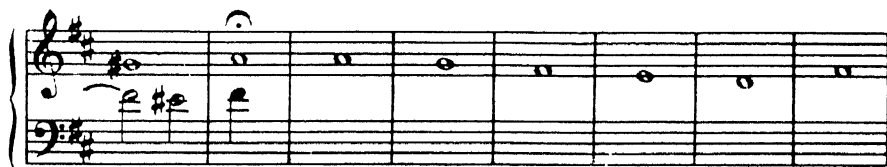


A chorale prelude naturally becomes more interesting when an attempt to realize rhythmic variety in the accompanying voices is made. We could, for example, improvise a florid counterpoint against a hymn tune, as follows :

O Mensch, bewein' dein Sünde gross

Psalm 36

Man. 1

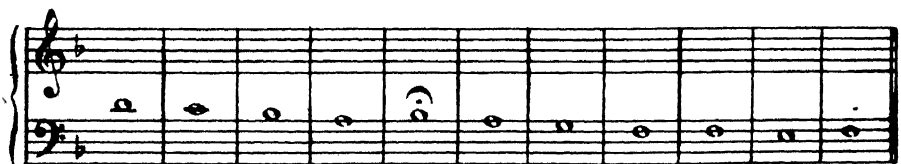
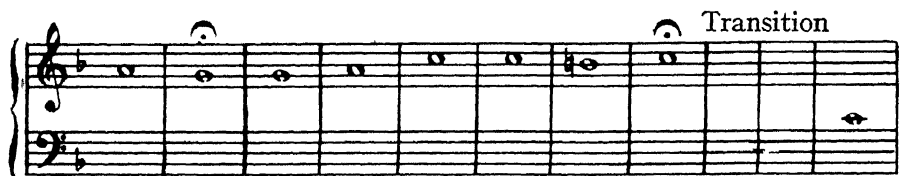
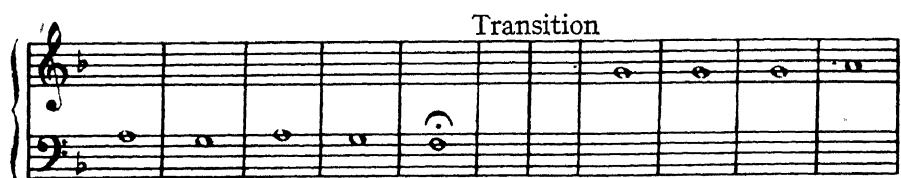


Treat the second and third lines of this hymn in the same way, setting the cantus firmus in the base when repeating.

There would be no point in giving more exercises, as all hymns can be developed in this way. Organists would do well to continue this type of exercise until they attain sufficient experience.

A certain rhythm can also be maintained in the contra-melody.

Take the hymn "Nun danket alle Gott" and improvise a counter-point based on the rhythm and instructions given below—



Improvise a contrapuntal voice, adhering to the rhythm indicated below, against the melody of the hymn "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr."

The image shows four systems of musical notation for a two-part chorale prelude. Each system consists of a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The melody in the treble staff is a hymn tune. The bass staff provides a contrapuntal accompaniment with a specific rhythmic pattern.

A two-part chorale prelude does not always need to be made up of a counterpoint set against a cantus firmus. A motif may also be derived from the first line of the hymn and then developed by imitation.

We might take the first line of Psalm 42 of the French Psalter, from which the following motif is derived—

A single line of musical notation showing a motif derived from the first line of Psalm 42 of the French Psalter. The motif is in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 3/4 time.

Develop this motif by imitation to form a short prelude. It might start as follows—

A short musical prelude in two parts, starting with the motif from the previous block. The notation shows a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

The motif above includes all the notes of the first line of the hymn. This, however, is not absolutely necessary, for it is sufficient when there is an obvious melodic tie between the line of the hymn in question and the selected motif.

Improvise a prelude using imitation, based on the following motif, to the hymn "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott."



A fine example of the treatment using imitation of a Gregorian melody is the prelude to the Offertorium "Terra Tremuit," by the well-known Dutch organist and composer, Albert de Klerk.

Andante

I

II

Both of the techniques, dealt with in the chapter on Imitation, have been applied in this case. The upper voice is imitated by the lower voice in the first few bars, after which each voice imitates itself.

Improvise a short introduction to the hymn "Ave Maris Stella," which might begin as follows :

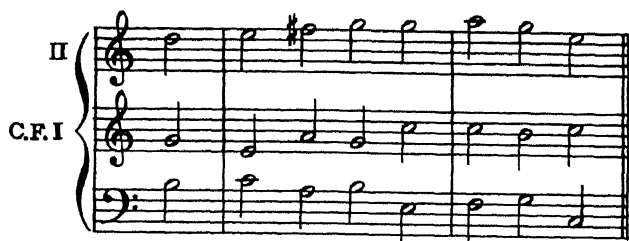


It would be superfluous to attempt to set more exercises. Every organist will be able to find motifs for a two-part improvisation using imitation in every hymn or Gregorian cantus firmus.

The three-part chorale prelude

It seldom occurs that a chorale melody, in which the counterpoint is formed by two counter-melodies in semibreves, is required as a chorale prelude. The playing of hymns, in which the cantus firmus alternately occurs in the upper, middle or lower voice, is, however, an excellent preparatory exercise for certain forms of three-part chorale prelude.

Here, as an example, is the first line of the hymn "St. Anne"—



Continue the development in the same way, setting the cantus firmus in the upper and lower voices.

We will now take a hymn tune, improvising one counterpoint in semibreves and one in shorter notes, in such a way that the cantus firmus is heard alternately in the upper and middle voices.

Here, as an example, is the first line of the hymn "Vater unser im Himmelreich." The remaining lines should be treated in such a way that the 1st, 3rd and 5th lines are heard in the middle voice, and the 2nd, 4th and 6th in the upper voice :

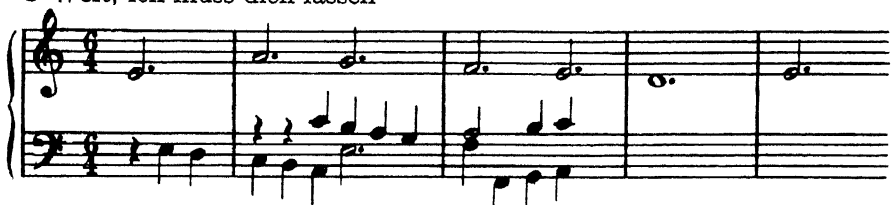


A greater degree of variety can be obtained by improvising two counterpoints in complementary rhythm against the hymn tune. In the following examples the actual melodic movement continues unbroken in crochets (or in quavers), though alternating between the contrapuntal voices :

Schmücke dich, O liebe Seele



O Welt, ich muss dich lassen



Hymn "Angelus."



Develop the remaining lines of these hymns in the same way. Then improvise a prelude to Psalm 118 of the French Psalter, built up as follows—

Hymn tune in semibreves in the upper voice.

Lines 1 and 2, crochets in the middle voice, semibreves in the lower voice.

Lines 3 and 4, semibreves in the middle voice, crotchets in the lower voice.

Lines 5 to 8, crotchets evenly distributed between the middle and lower voices.

A short motif may be incorporated in the accompanying voices.

Hymn "Bristol."

T. RAVENSCROFT



Develop the above hymn in a similar manner.

The types of three-part chorale preludes dealt with up to now have been characterized by an uninterrupted movement of crotchets or quavers in the accompanying voices, with the hymn tune played in the soprano. In the following examples, the melody is set in the lower and middle voices and is accompanied by contra-melodies in florid counterpoint.

Psalm 95 in the Dorian mode

II

I

Ped.

Psalm 69 in the Phrygian mode

II

I

Ped.

Lobe den Herren

C.F.



Two contra-melodies, each of which have their own rhythm that is strongly maintained throughout, may be improvised against a given *cantus firmus* :

Jesu, meine Zuversicht



Develop the remaining lines of this hymn in the same way. A three-part chorale prelude can also be improvised on a motif, derived from the first line of the hymn, making use of imitation.

Prelude to hymn "Ratisbon "

J. G. Werner



Certain lines of a hymn may also be played in *stretto*.

Dutch Psalm 100



Hymn "Aberystwyth"

Joseph Parry

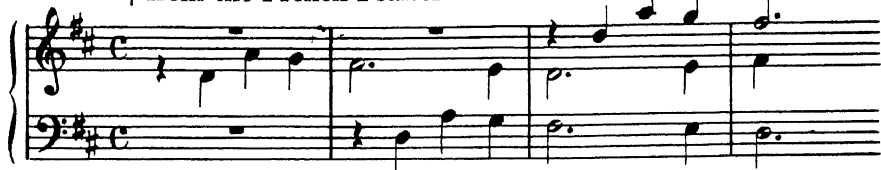


In this case, the imitation should preferably begin before the end of the motif.

Jesu, meine Zuversicht



Psalm 84 from the French Psalter

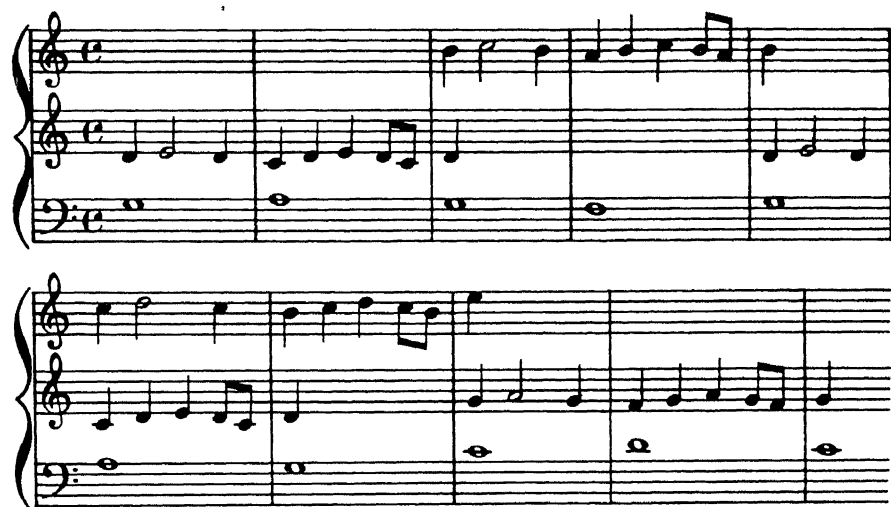


Improvise three-part preludes, using imitation, based on the motifs given in the bars above.

Two counterpoints can also be improvised against a given cantus firmus which imitate each other to a large extent. A fine example of this can be found in a fragment from the chorale prelude "Christe, Qui Lux es et Dies," by Albert de Klerk.



Greater unity is achieved when the motif is combined with the cantus firmus which has been derived from one of the lines. In his organ hymn "Veni, Creator Spiritus," Jean Titelouze derived a motif from the first line, which can be combined with the cantus firmus in various ways.



It is left to the discretion of the organist to make an appropriate musical selection from the various possibilities, and naturally the motif may appear in an altered form.

The motif, which we have derived from the second line of the hymn, also permits of various combinations with the cantus firmus.



The following motifs could be developed against the 3rd and 4th lines :

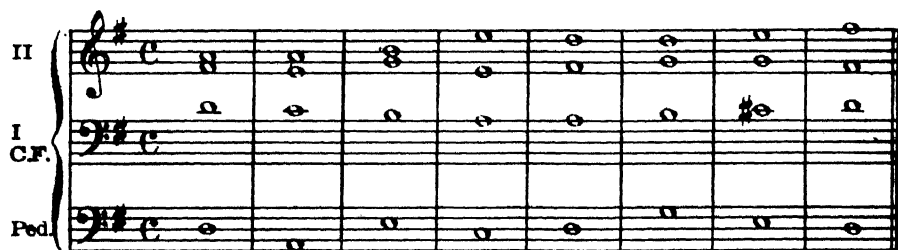


Improvise, playing the cantus firmus on the pedal, two voices in counterpoint in free imitation based on the motifs given below—



The four-part chorale prelude

We shall start with a four-part improvisation, using notes of equal duration, in which the cantus firmus occurs alternately in the soprano, tenor and bass.



Develop the following lines in the same way, after which the cantus firmus should be played in the soprano and bass.

- 1 C.F., soprano, manual 2.
Alto and tenor, manual 1.
Bass, pedal.
- 2 Soprano, alto and tenor, manual 1.
C.F., bass, pedal.

We will now consider improvising a bass in crotchets against a cantus firmus in the soprano in minims. The middle voices should be kept as subdued as possible.

Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern

Continue the development in the same manner

A wonderful example of a bass in quavers against a cantus firmus in crotchets is to be found in the chorale "Ach grosser König, gross zu allen Zeiten" from J. S. Bach's "St. John Passion."

In many of his chorales, Bach wrote three contra-melodies in complementary rhythm against a single cantus firmus. I can do no better than draw the organist's attention to the chorales in the "St. Matthew" and "St. John" Passions, and to the cantatas in the "Christmas Oratorio."

Organists should constantly practice improvising on chorale preludes in which a movement in quavers, alternating between the voices, is maintained against the background of a cantus firmus in crotchets. The three upper voices should be played on one manual, and the bass on the pedal.

Naturally, contra-melodies in complementary rhythms can also be improvised against a cantus firmus in crotchets, resulting in a movement in semi-quavers. Examples can be found in Bach's "Orgelbüchlein." The following chorales, among others, should also be studied: "Alle Menschen müssen sterben," "Christ lag in Todesbanden," "Herr Christ, der ein'ge Gottes-Sohn," and "Jesu, meine Freude."

Develop a few hymns of your own choosing on the organ in such a way that a semiquaver movement is obtained against the background of the hymn tune in crotchets.

The chorales in the "Orgelbüchlein" also include a movement of three notes in the contra-melodies to one note of the cantus firmus ("Jesus Christus, unser Heiland," No. 32), and one of six against one note ("Vater unser im Himmelreich," No. 47). Develop a few hymns of your own choice in a similar manner.

Gregorian chants also lend themselves admirably to being treated in this way. The following example gives the first bars of the "Kyrie Della Domenico," from "Fiori Musicali" by Frescobaldi (Kyrie from the 11th mass "In Dominicis Infra Annum") :



Develop this cantus firmus further on the organ, attempting to bring out the four note motif with which the alto opens in the accompanying voices. Naturally, it is unnecessary to improvise all four parts without an interruption. The subject of the cantus firmus is stated on manual II, the accompanying voices on I, to which the pedal is coupled.

A word in conclusion

Many types of chorale preludes frequently encountered were not discussed in the chapter on chorale preludes. No examples were given of four-part choral improvisations, in which the melody is set in the tenor or bass; no preludes illustrating a figured cantus firmus, and no preludes in which a motif was imitated with the choral melody.

When selecting the examples and exercises, the purposes of this manual, restricted to the principles of elementary improvisation, had to be borne in mind constantly. I have addressed myself to those organists who wish to learn simple and correct improvisation of chorale preludes, so that there was no point in including exercises which would have demanded a greater improvising ability and a much more versatile theoretical training than one would be justified in expecting from the average church organist. Including more material would also have meant expanding this book, and one of the author's main objects was to produce a book within the reach of all organists.

It goes without saying that organists should practice more complicated forms to the greatest extent their talents will allow. They should, therefore, regard this book purely as an introduction to the art of improvisation.

Should this book be reprinted, every attempt will be made to fall in with as many wishes as possible.

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